

St. Thomas history really began with missionary priests in 1838

By Bernice Senti Pluchos

It was a long and perilous journey of 2,000 miles that faced Father F. Norbert Blanchet. For some time the Hudson's Bay Company officials had been petitioning for the Catholic Church to send a priest with the sacraments. Many of the members of this British-based company were of the Catholic faith and missed having Sunday mass and the religious guidance that went with having a resident priest.

Due to the fact that all priests were ordained in Europe for the American missions, there was an understandable shortage of available fathers. The year 1838 can be considered as the beginning of the Catholic Church in the Oregon Territory, of which the St. Thomas Aquinas parish in Camas was a future part.

Father Blanchet chose to come to Fort Vancouver by canoe and overland portage into the dangerous Indian country rather than go by boat around the South American Cape Horn. After many months his party arrived in Vancouver on Aug. 24, 1838, and formed the St. James Mission.

was frozen solid enough to cross on from shore to shore during two or three different winters. During these times, the church members were unable to assist at Mass until the spring thaw and the roads were passable again. Some would then go by boat to Portland to make their Easter duty.

The Vancouver missions were originally formed from the St. James Mission and parish and included all of Clark County outside of Vancouver, and also the western part of Skamania County around Cape Horn.

The first recorded baptism in this end of the Vancouver Missions was administered in the Cascades (North Bonneville) area. From the St. James records can be read: "Father Aegidius Junger baptised Joseph, about one year old, son of William Carr and Ellen, an Indian woman." It was a hard life in the Cascades region and the first Catholic burial was of that same little boy.

We again read: "Father Peter Hylebos buried Joseph Carr, about 1½ year-old son of William and Ellen Carr on April 18, 1871." Earlier baptisms of local children occurred at Vancouver as



SIMPLE ELEGANCE distinguished the interior of the little church on the hill, St. Thomas Aquinas, which was built in 1901, at 13th and Birch streets. The church replaced an earlier Roman Catholic church built near Lackamas Lake.

LaCamas and Washougal. Marguerite Doherty Shields in her "History of the Cape Horn-Bear Prairie (Skye) Missions" states, "Mass was celebrated in practically every home at one time or another. As the priest usually came once a month, Cape Horn would have mass on a Monday and Bear Prairie on Tuesday, with improvised altars being set up in living rooms on the family linen chest. As fasting at that time began at midnight, the lady of the house would provide breakfast for all those attending. Those ladies who arrived by horseback wore split skirts and before mass started, they would take turns using the homesteader's out-building to change into their 'church-going' clothes. Life was rough and full of inconveniences but the people took time to always dress up for mass."

CHURCH BY THE LAKE

As the population increased, the people desired a local church. James Reilly, whose family came by boat to Parker's Landing in 1879, recalled these facts about the first church in Camas, during an

interview in 1962: "The DeLeat family donated 1.7 acres on the northwest side of what is now known as 'Fallen Leaf Lake.' A frame church was built in the year 1881. Land was cleared of trees and an open area in front of the church was used to park the buggies and tie up the horses. The little cemetery was in back. (Several graves can still be found in this spot.)

"The church had an arch in front of the altar and was papered in a brown flowered wallpaper. There was a woodburner stove in the church. Whoever got there first would go out and cut the first tree that was closest to it for fuel. Len Bartholomy saw to it that the church was in good shape for services."

Some of the Catholic families who helped in the building of the little church were: Delaney, Sweeney, Dowd, O'Reilly, Bartholomy, DeLeat, Nolan and Coffey.

ROUGH TRAVELING

During the winter when the roads were very rutted and washed out, it was difficult to get to the monthly mass. Chris A. Schlegel, whose family came

to the Vancouver area in 1877, recalls:

"We moved to our farm in Washougal in 1890. In winter months, to get to town from our place you had to go by foot or horseback, because you couldn't take a wagon out in the country. You would get buried in mud up to the axle. When it was too bad for even horses, some folks took to walking along the paper mill log flume to get to church. The flume started nine miles northeast of Camas. There was a narrow walkway attached to the side of the flume and no railing. On the ground it didn't matter, but at times the flume would be 100 feet in the air over a gully."

Mass was offered at the Schlegel home twice a year. At that time, word was passed to the logging camps in the hills and the loggers and their wives and children would come out to join the local farmers at mass. (Much of this early history was compiled by the late Nora Self.)

Some of the early priests who attended the mass were: Father Joseph Delannoy and Father Felix Verwilghen from Belgium. In 1944,

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Father Francis A. Moens wrote to Father Edmund Hayes who was compiling a parish history: "While at St. John's (Glenwood), I had five churches to look after and nine mission stations." All this was accomplished on dirt roads and on horseback, during the years 1897 to 1903. Father J. Brucker followed Father Moens as mission priest.

In 1901-02, the second church in the Camas area was built in 13th and Birch Streets. Called St. Thomas Aquinas, the property was donated by the Litz family and much of the labor of building was done by the parishioners. It cost \$600 and seated 140 people.

IN WASHOUGAL

At the turn of the century, the Catholic people of Washougal decided that they, too, needed a church. Land was donated by the Giesz family on Sunset View road, about one-fourth mile from the present Evergreen Highway. A church, 42 feet in length, with about six pews was built. Mr. and Mrs. Max Schmid were the first couple married in St.

Anthony's, with Father P.L. Taurin witnessing. Mrs. Schmid, in a recent interview, recalled: "The church was white, with a small steeple. The benches were simply planks about ten inches deep with no backs, and the congregation knelt on the hard floor rather than on padded kneelers. Three windows on either side, along with coal oil lamps when needed, were the source of light. Mrs.

Ann Sault played the small organ that was in the back of the church."

A small cemetery of 1.7 acres was planted next to the church. The parish was small in the beginning with about 6 to 8 families and mass was offered about once a month. The little church had an active altar society. After forty years of use, the last mass was offered in the early 40s.

Succeeding priests in the Camas parish were: Father Maurice Van de Walle, from

Father Joseph Carman, from Holland in 1907. The Irish sent Father M. O'Donnell in 1913. The horse was phased out and Father O'Donnell could be seen during around in his little Model T. The highway between Vancouver and Camas-Washougal was paved in 1917, and this made the Vancouver missions priests' job a little easier.

In 1925, a rectory was built. Camas would have a resident priest, Father Terrence Caraher. The Vancouver-Camas mission days were finally over. In 1929, Father Roger Furlong, with his very

sunny disposition, came to stay for seven years. The priest at Camas was still in charge of four mission churches as well as Camas. Father Edmund Barry was at St. Thomas' from 1936 until 1939.

A NEW CHURCH

But now it was time for a new church. In 1944, it was recorded by the Sisters of Providence:

"At the beginning of Vacation Religion school, Father announced the purchase of property for a new church. He asked the

Saturday to help fell the trees so that the wood would be dry and ready to sell later.

"During last winter, Father had asked the people not to go up to the choir unless absolutely necessary, because he wanted the church to last until the new one was built. This I can prove because a couple of times while I presided at the organ during the winter, the wild winds blew and the choir did rock and I just wondered what might happen."

Mrs. Ann Sault who played the organ for St. Anthony's in Washougal and

St. Thomas' in Camas for 27 years, stated that at times in the tiny choir loft she also could feel the wind push the wall against her back and wondered if she was helping to hold it up.

Father Edmund Hayes guided the beginning of the new church on NE 4th avenue and Oak Street. There were now 150 families in the parish. His untimely death due to a heart attack on Sept. 6, 1949, shocked the community. Father Walter Morteck, a former Vancouver boy, was appointed new

parish priest. He completed the new church and stayed until 1962. He was appointed pastor of a large parish in Seattle in 1962, and Father Thomas Phelan arrived.

A NEW LOOK

Vatican II had come and gone, and with it came new directives for church architecture. The altar was brought forward, new stained-glass windows were installed, and the English mass was begun. It was well received, along with congregational singing.

Father Phelan stayed with the parish for eight years. He was followed by Father John Marsh and Father Brendan Coleman and Father Joseph O'Shea. In 1974 Father John Bowman arrived. He is a real favorite with children and adults alike, and after mass on Sundays is usually surrounded by his parishioners on the church front steps.

A lot has happened in the Camas-Washougal area since that first mass in the 1860s in Washougal. From mission priests from Vancouver, to the lake site, and on to the wooded hill, the members of St. Thomas' Aquinas Parish have taken an active part in the building of the Camas-Washougal area. They are looking forward to the years of service ahead for them in Clark County.

During the 1870s the Columbia River was frozen solid enough to cross.

They did much traveling to the surrounding areas where Catholics were settled. It is thought that some time in the 1860s that mass was offered in the Washougal area by A.M.A. Blanchet, Norbert's younger brother. By then Norbert was Bishop of Oregon and his brother, Bishop of Washington. The only way to get from Vancouver to Washougal was by boat up the Columbia or by horseback over the deep-rutted Indian trails.

recorded that during the 1870s the Columbia River early as 1850.

Also from the Cascades region came the first marriage. Rodney Goodenough from The Dalles and Mary Ann Monaghan from the Cascades were married Feb. 5, 1874.

The first Catholic church constructed in this area was St. Mary's (Pioneer) in 1867. St. John's (Glenwood) was built in 1868. The priests were living in St. James' Parish and came to the homes of their mission parishioners to offer mass. Some of their stations were in Yacolt, Bear Prairie, Cape Horn,

The benches were simply planks about 10 inches deep, with no backs.